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Author(s): Bruce Lincoln

Source: *History of Religions*, Aug., 2002, Vol. 42, No. 1 (Aug., 2002), pp. 1-18

Published by: The University of Chicago Press

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Bruce Lincoln

ISAAC NEWTON AND ORIENTAL JONES ON MYTH, ANCIENT HISTORY, AND THE RELATIVE PRESTIGE OF PEOPLES

I

On February 2, 1786, in the third of his celebrated Anniversary Discourses to the Asiatic Society of Bengal, of which he was president and founder, Sir William "Oriental" Jones (1746–94) announced that the Sanskrit language was "more perfect than the *Greek,* more copious than the *Latin,* and more exquisitely refined than either."[1] Having redistributed linguistic and, by implication, cultural prestige from Europe to Asia in this fashion, he then attempted to reconcile East and West by seeking

[1] Sir William Jones, "Third Anniversary Discourse, on the Hindus," in *The Works of Sir William Jones,* ed. Anna Maria Shipley Jones (1799; reprint, Delhi: Agam Prakashan, 1976–79), 3:34. For good biographies of Jones, see Garland Cannon, *The Life and Mind of Oriental Jones: Sir William Jones, the Father of Modern Linguistics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990); R. H. Robins, "The Life and Work of Sir William Jones," *Transactions of the Philological Society* (1987): 1–23; Janardan Prasad Singh, *Sir William Jones: His Mind and Art* (New Delhi: S. Chand, 1982); and S. N. Mukherjee, *Sir William Jones: A Study in Eighteenth Century British Attitudes to India* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1968). For highly appreciative discussion of his contributions to numerous fields, see Kevin Brine and Garland Cannon, ed., *Objects of Enquiry: The Life, Contributions, and Influences of Sir William Jones (1746–1794)* (New York: New York University Press, 1995); Alexander Murray, ed., *Sir William Jones, 1746–1794: A Commemoration* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998). Cannon's contribution to the former volume ("Oriental Jones: Scholarship, Literature, Multiculturalism, and Humankind," pp. 25–50) and Thomas R. Trautmann's to the latter ("The Lives of Sir William Jones," pp. 91–121) are particularly broad and synthetic. A bibliography was published by Garland Cannon, *Sir William Jones: A Bibliography of Primary and Secondary Sources* (Amsterdam: Benjamins, 1979).

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0018-2710/2003/4201-0001$10.00

a higher level of integration between them. Observing that in its grammar and lexicon, Sanskrit closely resembled Greek and Latin—also Persian, Germanic, and Celtic—he suggested that all descended from a common, now-lost ancestor, which others would later name "Aryan" or "(Proto-)Indo-European." In that moment, Jones thus redefined the limits of prehistory, renegotiated the relations among peoples, and laid the basis not only for modern historical linguistics but also for modern racism. Others had recognized some of the same resemblances among languages as did Jones.[2] He, however, placed this observation on a much more scientific ground by stressing similarities of morphology alongside those of phonology and lexicography and also by theorizing a language family on a *Stammbaum* model, where the attested cognate languages are understood as descendants of a common, but no longer extant, ancestor.[3] Most contemporary researchers grant high marks to his linguistic acumen and dismiss the racial theories that appropriated his results as an abusive misuse of the great scholar's work.[4] Things, however, are not quite so simple, as becomes clear when one recognizes that for Jones the study of languages was not an end in itself but a useful instrument in pursuit of

[2] The standard account given by historians of linguistics is that of Hans Aarsleff, *The Study of Language in England, 1780–1860* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1967), pp. 123–36. Those who have discussed the Indo-European thesis and its historical fallout generally treat Jones in a benign fashion, thus Leon Poliakov, *The Aryan Myth: A History of Racist and Nationalist Ideas in Europe* (New York: Basic, 1974), p. 190; J. P. Mallory, *In Search of the Indo-Europeans: Language, Archaeology and Myth* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1989), pp. 11–13; or Bernard Sergent, *Les indo-européens: Histoire, langues, mythes* (Paris: Payot, 1995), pp. 25–27. Rather more critical are historians of the British imperial adventure in India, including Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage, 1978), pp. 77–80; Bernard Cohn, *Colonialism and Its Forms of Knowledge: The British in India* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1996), pp. 16–75; and Thomas R. Trautmann, *Aryans and British India* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), pp. 28–29, 68–72.

[3] Regarding those who anticipated Jones's work and the way he improved on their formulations, see Giuliano Bonfante, "Ideas on the Kinship of the European Languages from 1200 to 1800," *Cahiers d'histoire mondiale* 1 (1953–54): 679–99, esp. 680; Jean-Claude Muller, "Early Stages of Language Comparison from Sassetti to Sir William Jones (1786)," *Kratylos* 31 (1986): 1–31; Daniel Droixhe, *De l'origine du langage aux langues du monde: Études sur les XVIIe et XVIIIe siècles* (Tübingen: Gunter Narr, 1987), and *La linguistique et l'appel de l'histoire (1600–1800): Rationalisme et révolutions positivistes* (Geneva: Droz, 1978); George Metcalf, "The Indo-European Hypothesis in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries," in *Studies in the History of Linguistics: Traditions and Paradigms,* ed. D. H. Hymes (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1974), pp. 233–57; and Rosane Rocher, "Lord Monboddo, Sanskrit, and Comparative Linguistics," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 100 (1980): 173–80.

[4] Regarding Jones's contribution to the foundation of historical linguistics as a rigorous science, see R. H. Robins, "Jones as a General Linguist in the Eighteenth-Century Context," in Brine and Cannon, eds., pp. 83–91; Garland Cannon, "Sir William Jones, Language Families, and Indo-European," *Word* 43 (1992): 49–59, and "Jones's 'Sprung from Some Common Source': 1786–1986," in *Sprung from Some Common Source: Investigations into the Prehistory of Languages,* ed. Sydney M. Lamb and E. Douglas Mitchell (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1991), pp. 23–47.

far bigger game. To appreciate the full audacity and danger of his project, it is useful to shift attention to other aspects of his research, beginning with myth and moving through religion, ancient history, and the relative dignity of the world's peoples, topics that he—like other authors whose writings he engaged—understood to be densely interrelated.

II

To begin, Jones looked on myth with mixed interest and condescension: a genre characteristic of less rational "others" but a promising topic for research. To be sure, it stood in contrast to reason and science as these had developed in Europe, but if brought under their rigorous scrutiny, it could yield knowledge of a past more ancient than any recoverable through conventional historic inquiry. He spelled out his views in a 1784 essay "On the Gods of Greece, Italy, and India," where he enumerated "four principal sources of all mythology." In the first position, he pointed to the relation between myth, history, and natural revelation, which opened up the possibility of recovering a dependable knowledge of the past, the natural world, and primordial religion from the distorted form such knowledge assumes in myth:

I. Historical, or natural truth has been perverted into fable by ignorance, imagination, flattery, or stupidity . . .
II. A wild admiration of the heavenly bodies . . .
III. The magick of poetry, whose essential business it is, to personify the most abstract notions, and to place a nymph or a genius in every grove and almost in every flower . . .
IV. The metaphors and allegories of moralists and metaphysicians.[5]

In generating this list, Jones drew on the writings and theories of others, whom he left here unnamed. Two years later, he specified those by whom he was influenced, each of whom he felt had rightly understood only one aspect of myth, while ignoring the fact that there were different sorts of myth, which had different origins and thus demanded different kinds of explanation. "I cannot believe with NEWTON," he began, "that ancient mythology was nothing but historical truth in a poetical dress, nor, with BACON, that it consisted solely of moral and metaphysical allegories, nor with BRYANT, that all the heathen divinities are only different attributes and representations of the Sun or of deceased progenitors, but conceive that the whole system of religious fables rose, like the *Nile,* from several distinct sources."[6] The last two of Jones's references are to

[5] Sir William Jones, "On the Gods of Greece, Italy, and India," in *Works of Sir William Jones,* 3:320–22.
[6] Jones, "Third Anniversary Discourse, on the Hindus," pp. 39–40.

Francis Bacon and Jacob Bryant, the latter of whom has recently received extensive attention elsewhere.[7] The first in his list, however, deserves much fuller discussion, for it was none other than Sir Isaac Newton from whom Jones took his ideas regarding the relation of history and myth.

The work on which Jones relied was Newton's *Chronology of Ancient Kingdoms Amended* (1728).[8] Here, the preeminent scientist of his era entered into a discourse on universal history that flourished in the latter half of the seventeenth century and was motivated by the recognition that Greek, Egyptian, and Oriental texts spoke of more ancient times than those found in the Bible. Some authors, like Charles Blount (1654–93) and Giovanni Marana (1642–93), sought to exploit this fact to challenge the primacy of Holy Scripture. Others, like Gerard Vossius (1577–1649) and Ralph Cudworth (1617–88), attempted to bring such destabilizing possibilities under control.[9] Like many of his predecessors, Newton applied euhemerist hermeneutics to mythic texts, treating their gods and fabulous heroes as ancient, but fully historic, kings, whose deeds were embroidered with the miraculous and whose dates were highly inflated. By rationalizing their stories and replacing the figures given for their life span, length of reign, and so forth, with estimates he judged consistent with the dictates of reason, Newton attempted to recover history from myth. What is more, this operation let him place the events recounted in the myths of all peoples safely within the Biblical chronology of Archbishop James Ussher (1581–1656), who dated Creation to 4004 B.C.E., Noah's flood to 2347, Saul's founding of the Israelite kingdom to 1095, and Solomon's Temple to 1012.[10]

Toward this end, Newton combined massive erudition with precise calculations (mathematical and astronomic) to date events narrated in the Bible and elsewhere. The detail and evident rigor of his work, together

[7] Trautmann, *Aryans and British India,* pp. 28–61; and Bruce Lincoln, *Theorizing Myth: Narrative, Ideology, and Scholarship* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), pp. 76–100.

[8] Sir Isaac Newton, *Chronology of Ancient Kingdoms Amended. To which is Prefix'd, A Short Chronicle from the First Memory of Things in Europe, to the Conquest of Persia by Alexander the Great* (1728; reprint, London: Histories & Mysteries of Man, 1988).

[9] Compare Gerard Johannes Vossius, *De theologia gentili et physiologia Christiana* (Amsterdam, 1641); Ralph Cudworth, *The True Intellectual System of the Universe* (London, 1678); Giovanni P. Marana, *Letters Writ by a Turkish Spy living at Paris,* 8 vols. (London, 1692); and Charles Blount et al., *The Oracles of Reason* (London, 1693). Regarding the relations among these works, see Richard H. Popkin, "The Crisis of Polytheism and the Answers of Vossius, Cudworth, and Newton," in *Essays on the Context, Nature, and Influence of Isaac Newton's Theology,* ed. James E. Force and Richard H. Popkin (Dordrecht: Kluwer, 1990), pp. 9–25, and "Polytheism, Deism, and Newton," in ibid., pp. 27–42.

[10] James Ussher, *The annals of the world. Deduced from the origin of time and continued to the beginning of the emperour Vespasians reign, and the totall destruction and abolition of the temple and common-wealth of the Jews* (London: E. Tyler, 1658).

with his towering reputation, gave his results the prestige of science. Newton, however, was committed to a distinctly unorthodox form of Christianity focused on God the Father in his role as Creator and to downplaying the other two persons of the Trinity.[11] Outside the Bible, he hoped to recover traces of natural religion and primordial monotheism predating and complementing the more specific truths of Christian revelation. Knowing his views to be heretical, he published nothing on the topic during his lifetime. The *Chronology of Ancient Kingdoms Amended* came out only in the year after his death, and a much more daring text, to which it is closely related (his *Theologiae Gentilis Origines Philosophicae*) is still available only in manuscript.[12] In the published volume, his heterodox views surfaced only occasionally, as in a crucial, if guarded passage, where he described original religious knowledge as constituted by a modest set of ethical precepts and belief in a single, not a triune, creator: "So then, *the believing that the world was framed by one Supreme God, and is governed by him; and the loving and worshipping him, and honouring our parents, and loving our neighbour as our selves, and being merciful even to brute beasts,* is the oldest of all religions."[13]

III

This theological detail notwithstanding, Newton succeeded in his major task, encompassing all history within Archbishop Ussher's chronology. He concluded that the first extrabiblical events that can dependably be dated came only in 1125 B.C.E., when King Mephres ruled over Egypt and Pelasgus, Aeolus, Cecrops, and other heroes of myth entered Greece from that land.[14] Kingship, he argued, had its origin in Egypt and Chaldaea, from which points it disseminated throughout the earth. This view is consistent with the Hebrew Bible's negative assessment of kingship, which makes it an institution Israel adopted from its neighbors. Perceived as necessary for military and political survival, it represented a major—and ultimately quite deleterious—deviation from primordial religious truths, since the nation's proper king was only God himself (see,

[11] Most recently, see Thomas C. Pfizenmaier, "Was Isaac Newton an Arian?" *Journal of the History of Ideas* 38 (1997): 57–80, with reference to earlier discussions. The fullest discussion of Newton's religious beliefs remains Frank Manuel, *The Religion of Isaac Newton* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1974), although the literature has grown rapidly since its publication.

[12] Compare K. J. Knoespel, "Interpretive Strategies in Newton's *Theologiae gentilis origines philosophiae*," in Force and Popkin, eds., pp. 179–202; and Richard Westfall, "Isaac Newton's *Theologiae Gentilis Origines Philosophicae*," in *The Secular Mind: Essays Presented to Franklin L. Baumer*, ed. Warren Wagar (New York: Holmes & Meier, 1982), pp. 15–34.

[13] Newton, p. 190 (italics as in the original).

[14] Ibid., pp. 9–10; cf. pp. 166–74 and 197–202. Ussher, in contrast, dated this king (whom he found in Manetho's hellenistic list of Egyptian kings) to 1743 B.C.E. and also admitted two earlier monarchs in Egypt, dating back to 1873 B.C.E. Still earlier, however, are such biblical events as Abraham's departure from Ur of the Chaldees (1923 B.C.E.).

esp., 1 Samuel 8). Newton also associated kingship with a loss of religious truth, consistent with euhemerist theory, which made veneration of kings the source of superstition and myth.

> Idolatry began in *Chaldæa* and *Egypt,* and spread thence into *Phœnicia* and the neighbouring countries, long before it came into *Europe*. . . . The countries upon the *Tigris* and the *Nile* being exceeding fertile, were first frequented by mankind, and grew first into Kingdoms, and therefore began first to adore their dead Kings and Queens: hence came the Gods of *Laban,* the Gods and Goddesses called *Baalim* and *Ashtaroth* by the *Canaanites,* the Dæmons or Ghosts to whom they sacrificed, and the *Moloch* to whom they offered their children in the days of *Moses* and the Judges. Every City set up the worship of its own Founder and Kings, and by alliances and conquests they spread this worship, and at length the *Phœnicians* and *Egyptians* brought into *Europe* the practice of Deifying the dead.[15]

Newton's summary of ancient chronology began with the Egyptians and Chaldeans and ended with the Persians. This choice followed from his opinion that dependable historic records in prose—those of Herodotus, for instance—were available for the era that commenced with the founding of the Achaemenian dynasty by Cyrus the Great, an event he dated with reasonable accuracy to 536 B.C.E.[16] Beyond the Greek sources, however, Newton was aware that Persian texts described two fabulously ancient dynasties of kings. One of these, known as the Kayanians, included not only members of the Achaemenian dynasty but several others of earlier date, and these Newton identified with the Median kings, known from Herodotus and the Bible. The oldest dynasty mentioned in these texts, however, is that of the Peshdadians, literally the "law givers."[17] Modern scholarship consistently treats them as mythic, but for euhemerists, this offers no escape from the task of extracting historic kings from the fabulous narratives of myth. Accordingly, Newton sought to associate the Peshdadians with a pre-Median dynasty of rulers. After seriously entertaining the ancient kings of Elam for this role, he settled on the Assyrians, whose origins he dated to 790 B.C.E.[18]

Newton also expressed some original views about the place of Persian religion within world history. In general, he maintained that the primordial religious truths revealed at Creation were preserved down to the time

[15] Ibid., pp. 160–61.

[16] Ibid., pp. 1, 45–46; dating at p. 40.

[17] Regarding the Persian sources, see Arthur Christensen, *Le premier homme et le premier roi dans l'histoire légendaire des Iraniens,* 2 vols. (Uppsala: Appelberg, 1918–34), which remains a landmark of scrupulous and insightful research.

[18] Newton, pp. 373–76. The Assyrians proper are treated at pp. 265–93 and the date their Empire was founded at p. 34. At p. 293, he entertained a connection to Elam but left the question unsettled. Ussher dated the founding of the Median empire to 712 B.C.E.

of Noah's grandsons and the division of nations at the Tower of Babel (Genesis 10–11). Thereafter, these truths were best preserved in the line passing from Shem through Abraham and Isaac down to Solomon and his temple, thence into Judaism and (unitarian) Christianity. False gods and worship were introduced and spread by two kinds of agent. On the one hand, there were the nations where kingship—and veneration of kings—was introduced: first Egypt and Chaldea, as we have seen, then Assyria, Babylon and others in a historic sequence ending with Rome. On the other, there were a number of figures in the lineage of Israel who, finding themselves estranged from their kinsmen, inaugurated new nations and religions: Ishmael, Esau, and the children born to Abraham by his second wife, Keturah (Gen. 25:1–4).[19] With specific reference to Iran, Newton wrote as follows: "This religion of the *Persian* Empire was composed partly of the institutions of the *Chaldæans,* in which *Zoroastres* was well skilled; and partly of the institutions of the ancient *Brachmans,* who are supposed to derive even their name from the *Abrahamans,* or sons of *Abraham,* born of his second wife *Keturah,* instructed by their father in the worship of ONE GOD without images, and sent into the east."[20]

Newton thus inserted the Chaldeans, Brahmans, and Keturah between the truths of primordial revelation and Persian religion (fig. 1). As a result, Zoroaster's faith was deformed from the start by the sedimented myths, superstitions, idolatries, and errors it inherited from these earlier pagan systems. Newton's association of the Brahmans with Abraham through the mediation of "Abrahamans" is a particularly original piece of scholarly legerdemain, and his choice of Keturah as the instrument of his purposes is almost equally inventive. According to Gen. 25:5–6, Abraham gave gifts to the sons she bore him, but before his death, he sent them "eastward to the east country." All his inheritance went to Isaac, the sole son he regarded as legitimate, Keturah now being defined as a concubine.[21]

[19] Ibid., pp. 186–90, with discussion of Keturah at p. 188.

[20] Ibid., pp. 350–51. Impressed by the testimony of Eusebius regarding Persian monotheism, Newton also posited a second strain of Iranian religion, taught by Otanes rather than Zoroaster. Close to the truths of primordial revelation, it was short-lived: "In a short time they declined from the worship of this Eternal, Invisible God, to worship the Sun, and the Fire, and dead men, and images, as the *Egyptians, Phœnicians,* and *Chaldæans* had done before: and from these superstitions, and the pretending to prognostications, the words *Magi* and *Magia,* which signify the Priests and Religion of the *Persians,* came to be taken in an ill sense" (ibid., p. 352).

[21] At Gen. 25:1, Keturah is named a wife, whom Abraham took after Sarah's death. At 25:6, however, she has clearly been reduced in status. Compare 1 Chron. 1:32, where she is called a concubine and her sons listed.

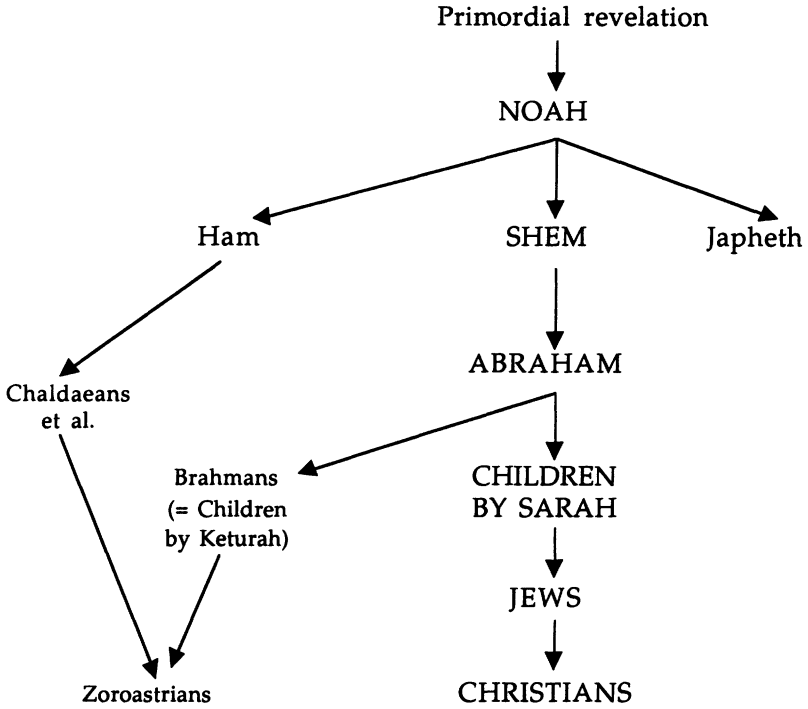

FIG. 1.—Chronology, relations, and implicit hierarchy among Persian and Judeo-Christian religions, as described by Sir Isaac Newton, *Chronology of Ancient Kingdoms Amended* . . . (1728; reprint, London: Histories & Mysteries of Man, 1988), pp. 186–90. Groups listed in capital letters retain large measures of true religion from primordial revelation. Lowercase letters and smaller typeface represent ever further deviation from these original truths.

IV

Notwithstanding his protestations and the reverence he evinced—"It is with the utmost diffidence, that I venture to add an observation of my own upon any work of NEWTON"—Jones was sufficiently motivated to dispute the latter on the dating of Iranian origins.[22] Thus, in one of his

[22] "It is with the utmost diffidence, that I venture to add an observation of my own upon any work of NEWTON; whose admirable tracts on the abstract sciences, and on the application of those sciences to natural Philosophy, exhibit the noblest specimen of perfection, to which the human intellect can be exalted; and whose treatises on lighter subjects, though incapable, from their very nature, of strict demonstration, are not without many strokes of that piercing genius, which raised him above all men who ever lived" (Sir William Jones, "Preface" to "A Short History of Persia from the Earliest Times to the Present Century," in *Works of Sir William Jones* [n. 1 above], 12:349–50). The passage is skillfully constructed

earliest essays, "A Short History of Persia from the Earliest Times to the Present Century" (1773), he quibbled with Newton over how the Peshdadians were treated. As an orientalist, fully competent in Persian, Jones turned to the original sources, particularly Firdausi's *Shahnamēh* and counted all the Peshdadians who appeared there. Finding eleven, he added this to the number of their Kayanian successors. Finally, he multiplied this sum (11 + 9 = 20) by the average length of their reigns, a point on which he took issue with Newton. Basing his case on euhemerist theory, he argued that Newton's figure of twenty years was too low. "In the infancy of the *Persian* Empire," he wrote, "the sovereigns were almost deified by the people, whom they had civilized; the temperance of those early ages might tend to lengthen their natural lives; and few of them were disturbed by civil wars or rebellions."[23] Twenty-eight years seemed a more reasonable estimate under these special circumstances, which meant that a total of 560 years (20 × 28) had elapsed from the dawn of Iranian history until the last Achaemenian's defeat by Alexander the Great in 330 B.C.E. Adding these figures (330 + 560) let him place the first Peshdadian monarch at 890 B.C.E., instead of 790.[24] The extra hundred years meant it was a Persian dynasty proper and neither Elamite nor Assyrian. By Jones's reckoning, the latter people were now dependent on the Persians, and he surmised that the Assyrian kingdom was founded by "some General or feudatory" of the third Peshdadian monarch.[25]

Jones began his account of Persian history with those whom Persian sources make the first Peshdadian. This is Kayumars, who actually played a somewhat larger role in Zoroastrian myth. There, under earlier forms of the same name (Pahlavi = Gayōmard < Avestan = Gayō marətan, both of which translate as "mortal life"), he was regarded as the first man in all of creation.[26] After the Arab conquest, however (652 C.E.), Islamic orthodoxy made it necessary to subordinate this figure to Adam with regard to temporal primacy. Authors accomplished this in several ways, but to cite one influential example, Ghazali demoted Kayumars by one generation, while compensating him in other fashions. Kayumars thus became

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to evince fulsome devotion, while still leaving an opportunity to critical engagement. Is it unreasonable to perceive a certain displaced Oedipal rivalry, since Newton had been a friend and reasonably close colleague of Jones's father, William Jones (1680–1749), himself a mathematician? On the father and his relation to Newton, see Cannon, *Life and Mind of Oriental Jones,* pp. 1–4; or Mukherjee, pp. 17–18 (both at n. 1 above).

[23] Jones, "Preface," p. 351, with citation of Newton's *Chronology of Ancient Kingdoms Amended* (pp. 51–54) at p. 349.

[24] *Works of Sir William Jones,* 12:349–51.

[25] Ibid., p. 351 and note; cf. pp. 400–401.

[26] For a survey of all the relevant texts and the way they relate to one another, see Christensen, 1:11–105.

Adam's son and was made the world's first king by his father, while priestly responsibilities descended in other lines.[27] Relatively ignorant of the Zoroastrian sources but well versed in the Persian, Jones accepted Kayumars's status as primordial monarch as a historic fact.[28] Granted that historic realities were obscured at times by the supernatural aspects that cluttered Firdausi and other sources, it became his task to clean these up and offer a rational account.

> CAIUMARAS [= Jones's transcription of Kayumars], whom some have supposed to be *the King of Elam* mentioned in the Scripture, founded in the Persian Empire, and fixed the seat of it in the province of *Azarbigian.* He was opposed in his noble enterprises by the inhabitants of the mountains and forests, who, like the wild *Tartars* and *Arabs,* dwelled in tents or caverns, and led a rambling life among rocks and in deserts. The rude appearance of these Savages, compared with the more polished manners of those, who first began to be civilized, gave rise to *the fiction of Dæmons and Giants* among the *Persians,* who call them *Dêves* and represent them as declared enemies to Man.[29]

After his initial slap at Newton's Elamite hypothesis, Jones offered a narrative consistent with his Persian sources, where kingship is the origin of civilization and not of idolatry. Kingship also furnished him with the basis for an initial division of humanity into two different sorts. On the one hand were the Persians, whose relatively high level of culture he attributed to Kayumars's gifts, which included the royal institution, a capital city, and a set of "polished manners" consistent with urban existence. In stark contrast were the "savage" peoples, who lived in the wild and opposed his "noble enterprises." Jones further subdivided this second group into those who dwelt on the desert in tents, like Arabs, and those even more backward people who lived in mountain caves, like "the wild Tartars" (fig. 2).

Although Jones contended that the historic reality of these savage peoples "gave rise to the fiction" of the beings known as dēws ("demons";

[27] F. R. C. Bagley, trans., *Ghazali's Book of Counsel for Kings* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1964), p. 48. Regarding this and other ways through which Islamic authors dealt with the problems posed by Kayumars, see the fine discussion of Mohamad Tavakoli-Targhi, "Contested Memories: Narrative Structures and Allegorical Meanings of Iran's Pre-Islamic History," *Iranian Studies* 29 (1996): 149–75.

[28] The first translation of the Avesta, that of Abraham-Hyacinthe Anquetil Duperron, appeared in 1771, and Jones—who was offended by the disdain Anquetil showed toward Oxford, his own alma mater—dismissed it as a pretentious fraud. He spelled out his views in a polemic (Sir William Jones, "Lettre à Monsieur A*** du P***, dans laquelle est comprise l'Examen de sa Traduction des Livres attribués à Zoroastre," in *Works of Sir William Jones,* 10:403–43), which set back the study of Avestan for the next fifty years. See, further, Cannon, *Life and Mind of Oriental Jones,* pp. 42–44; and Arthur Waley, "Anquetil Duperron and William Jones," *History Today* 2 (1952): 23–33.

[29] *Works of Sir William Jones,* 12:399.

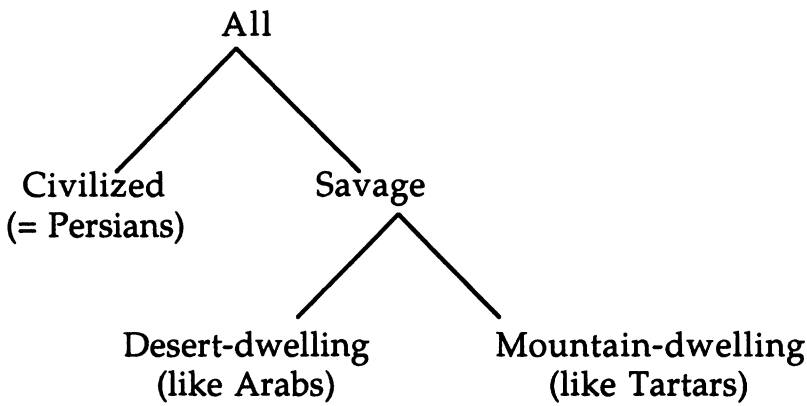

FIG. 2.—Subcategories of the people described in Sir William Jones's account of Kayumars ("A Short History of Persia," in *The Works of Sir William Jones*, ed. Anna Maria Shipley Jones [1799; reprint, Delhi: Agam Prakashan], 12:399).

much more rarely, "giants") in Persian myth, in truth the relation was quite the reverse. It was he who transformed the demons of myth into a pseudohistorical account, and his labor of demythologization had further consequences. In the fullest and most influential Persian account, that of Firdausi, which Jones seems to have used as his prime source, Kayumars had no human enemies. Rather, as the ideal embodiment of kingship, he enjoyed universal loyalty and affection. "[Kayumars] ruled the world for thirty years, benevolent as the sun everywhere and as resplendent on his throne as the two weeks old moon shining above a slender cypress. All living creatures, wild or tame, on seeing him, assembled from every part of the world and took refuge with him, bowing low before his throne. And so it was that he grew in majesty and power. All came to him in the attitude of reverence, and hence religion took its rise."[30]

Firdausi went on to recount how Kayumars's son Siyāmag excited the envy of a black dēw: a demon who was himself the son of Ahriman, first of all demons and source of all evil. Battles followed in which first Siyāmag and then the black dēw were slain, but the antagonists were always humans on one side and demons on the other. Following Zoroastrian myth, Firdausi understood conflict as the result of demonic intervention: an original assault by the powers of evil that terminated a golden age of peace and harmony. Jones, however, located conflict inside the human, such that the civilized members of the species struggled from

[30] Reuben Levy, trans., *The Epic of the Kings: Shāh-nāma: The National Epic of Persia by Ferdowsi* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1968), p. 5. See, further, Christensen (n. 17 above), 1:66–79.

the outset against their savage, but still human, inferiors. What is more, he retrojected specific historic conflicts into this picture, associating Kayumars's savage opponents with the two peoples whom Iranians of later periods viewed as their ethnic others and eternal enemies: Arabs, on the one hand, and Tartars (i.e., Turco-Mongols, or "Turanians"), on the other.

v

This same tripartite ethnology provided an organizing template for the theories Jones presented in the eleven Anniversary Discourses he delivered to the Royal Asiatic Society (1784–94). Although the text of these lectures covers a full 252 pages in his collected *Works,* only one (admittedly, rather long) sentence in them was devoted to his formulation of the Indo-European language family.[31] In the rest, he marshaled his then-unsurpassed encyclopedic knowledge of Asia in support of his major thesis, to wit, that all the world's peoples derived from three primordial groups. In this context, he spoke of them as the Hindu, Arabian, and Tartarian races, but these groups are recognizably continuous with the civilized Persians, wild Arabs, and wilder Tartars of his 1773 essay. What is more, he now brought these same three groups into alignment with Noah's three sons by tracing the Hindu race to Ham, the Arabian race to Shem, and the Tartarian race to Japheth.[32] In his view, all three peoples originally shared the same homeland, where transpired the events of sacred history from Eden through Babel. In contrast to more orthodox constructions of biblical geography, he situated this most privileged of places, from which all the world's peoples dispersed, "between the *Oxus* and *Euphrates,* the mountains of *Caucasus* and the borders of *India,* that is, within the limits of *Iràn.*"[33]

Jones's displacement of the holy land eastward was audacious enough, yet he also significantly modified Newton's views of the transition from primordial revelation to pagan superstition. Newton held that the descendants of Ham and Japheth had succumbed to polytheistic errors almost immediately, as did most of those descended from Shem. The chief ex-

[31] The Anniversary Discourses are included in *Works of Sir William Jones* (n. 1 above), 3:1–252; the sentence on the relation of Sanskrit to Greek, Latin, etc., occurs at 1:34.

[32] Sir William Jones, "Ninth Anniversary Discourse, on the Origin and Families of Nations," in *Works of Sir William Jones,* 3:194–95. Also relevant in the background is another myth found in Firdausi, which describes the origin of the world's three peoples—Iranians, Arabs (or, more broadly, easterners), and Turians from the three sons of Feridūn. See, further, Bruce Lincoln, "Sir William Jones, Iranian Myth, and the Thesis of Aryan Origins," in *Pitye: Studia in Honorem Prof. I. Marazov,* ed. Rositsa Gicheva and Kostadin Rabodzhiev (Sofia: Anubis, 2002), pp. 39–46.

[33] *Works of Sir William Jones,* 3:196. The broader argument for Iranian origins is made in Sir William Jones, "Sixth Anniversary Discourse, on the Persians," in *Works of Sir William Jones,* 3:103–36, and "Ninth Anniversary Discourse, on the Origin and Families of Nations," pp. 185–204; see esp. pp. 109–11, 189–96, 201–3.

ception was the line that became Israel, which preserved its basic ethical tenets and its faith in a single creator.[34] In contrast, Jones allowed that these basic truths had been preserved for a while by peoples in all three of his racial groupings.[35] To be sure, the Tartars fell into "gross idolatry" within a few generations, and members of the Hindu race maintained their monotheist faith only during the reign of their first royal dynasty, since "a system so pure and sublime could hardly among mortals be of long duration."[36] Even so, Jones's views went far beyond Newton's, which themselves had daring elements. Although Newton admitted both natural and revealed religion, he was careful to preserve a Judeo-Christian monopoly on both forms of verity. In marked contrast, Jones granted the fundamental truths of natural religion, primordial revelation, and originary monotheism to all the world's population.

VI

For Jones to include Iranians among those who enjoyed such truths, as he desired, it was important to place them in much closer proximity to Noah's sons than either he or Newton had previously managed. Thus, if Iranian history commenced only in 890 B.C.E., as Jones argued in his 1773 essay, their religion should have been riddled with the polytheistic errors that accrued in the centuries after Babel. In 1787, however, one of his Bengali informants called an obscure Persian text to his attention. Its contents "at once dissipated the cloud, and cast a gleam of light on the primeval history of *Irân* and of the human race, of which I had long despaired, and which could hardly have dawned from any other quarter."[37] The text in question was the *Dabistan,* an encyclopedia of world religions that Jones mistakenly thought to have been written by Mohsan Fānī, a learned Kashmiri Sufi of the seventeenth century, and even more mistakenly thought to contain authentic traditions regarding the earliest prehistory of Iran.[38]

Subsequent research has dealt harshly with these claims and has shown the *Dabistan* and a companion text, the *Dasatir,* to be products of a heterodox Parsi sect in seventeenth-century Patna (the Āzar Kaivānis). Seeking to dignify and legitimate their own brand of Zoroastrianism over

[34] Newton (n. 8 above), pp. 186–90.

[35] On Arabs, see *Works of Sir William Jones,* 3:56–59; on Israel, 3:182–83; on Tartarians, 3:88–91; on Hindu race, 3:125–29.

[36] Ibid., pp. 88, 125.

[37] Ibid., p. 110. Jones said he received the text from "*Mir* MUHAMMED HUSAIN, one of the most intelligent *Muselmâns* in *India.*" Compare Jones's letter to J. Shore, later Lord Teignmouth, June 24, 1787, in *The Letters of Sir William Jones,* ed. Garland Cannon (Oxford: Clarendon, 1970), 2:739.

[38] Compare *The Dabistan, or School of Manners. Translated from the Original Persian,* trans. David Shea and Anthony Troyer, 3 vols. (Paris: Printed for the Oriental Translation Fund of Great Britain and Ireland, 1843).

all other religious traditions, they invented the primordial prehistory that so aroused Jones's enthusiasm.[39] Thus, in its first chapter, the *Dabistan* describes an Iranian dynasty that preceded Kayumars and the Peshdadians. This is the line of Mahābādian kings, unattested in any other source, whom it says were fourteen in number. The first of their line—the eponymous Mahābād—it credits with having introduced law, cities, philosophy, and medicine; the arts of cooking, clothing, and personal adornment; and a caste system like that found in India. Along with social hierarchy, he introduced "discipline and authority, justice and knowledge, kindness and severity," and most important of all, "the knowledge of God and the ceremonies of his worship."[40] On this slim textual and evidentiary basis, Jones advanced a far-reaching set of conclusions. The Mahābādians, not the Egyptians or Chaldeans as Newton had it, were the world's first kings and were responsible for introducing the arts of civilization.[41] As for their religion, Jones found it close to ideal: "The primeval religion of *Iràn,* if we rely on the authorities adduced by MOHSAN FÁNÍ, was that, which NEWTON calls the oldest (and it may justly be called the noblest) of all religions; 'a firm belief, that One Supreme God made the world by his power, and continually governed it by his providence; a pious fear, love, and adoration of Him; a due reverence for parents and aged persons; a fraternal affection for the whole human species, and a compassionate tenderness even for the brute creation.'"[42]

Further still, Jones concluded that Brahmanic priests were originally located in Iran, where they served as religious advisors to the Mahābādian kings. Belatedly rallying to Newton's view of the Peshdadians as Assyrian, he imagined that this dynasty's accession prompted a religious revolution, since they were of the Arabian and not the Hindu race.

[39] On the *Dabistan,* see E. G. Browne, *A Literary History of Persia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1902), 1:53–56 (with a summary of prior research and a scathing critique of Jones's credulity); S. H. Askari, "Dabistan-ī-Mazahib and Diwan-ī-Mubad," in *Indo-Iranian Studies Presented for the Golden Jubilee of the Pahlavi Dynasty of Iran,* ed. Fathullah Mujtabai (New Delhi: Indo-Iran Society, 1977), pp. 85–104; Tavakoli-Targhi (n. 27 above); and Aditya Behl, "An Ethnographer in Disguise: Comparing Self and Other in Mughal India," in *Notes on a Mandala: Essays in Honor of Wendy Doniger,* ed. Laurie Patton and David Heberman (New York: Seven Bridges, in press). On the Āzor Kaivānis, see J. J. Modi, "A Parsee High Priest (Dastur Azar Kaivan, A.D. 1529–1614) with his Zoroastrian Disciples in Patna, in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Century A.D.," *Journal of the K. R. Cama Oriental Institute* 17 (1930): 1–85; and Maneckji Nusservanji Dhalla, *Zoroastrian Theology from the Earliest Times to the Present Day* (1914; reprint, New York: AMS, 1972), pp. 311–18.

[40] *Dabistan,* 1:14–20.

[41] Jones, "Sixth Anniversary Discourse, on the Persians" (n. 33 above), pp. 109–11, and "Ninth Anniversary Discourse, on the Origin and Families of Nations" (n. 32 above), p. 302.

[42] Jones, "Sixth Anniversary Discourse, on the Persians," p. 125. Although marked by inverted commas, the passage in which Jones purports to quote Newton is, in fact, a close paraphrase of Newton, p. 190, which is quoted above at p. 5.

Influenced by Sabian ideas current among their racial brethren, the Peshdadians fell into polytheistic veneration of fire and the celestial bodies, departing from the truths of primordial revelation. Consequently, the Brahmans left Iran for India, where they preserved much—but not all—of the old religion.[43] And when the Peshdadians gave way to the Kayanians, Zoroaster introduced further changes still, drawing on the religious traditions then current in both India and Iran (fig. 3).[44]

VII

Recognition of the Mahābādians let Jones make his maximal case for the dignity and value of Asian peoples and nonbiblical religions. Within the context of his age, that case was radical: democratic and xenophilic to an extraordinary degree. Still, he operated within well-established limits. No more than Newton—or Ussher, for that matter—did he wish to overthrow biblical primacy. For all that he argued in favor of India, Iran, and the Hindu race, he did no more than assert that these people possessed the same original truths as did the people of Israel. Regarding the latter, Jones offered the following observations:

> With all the sottish perverseness, the stupid arrogance, and the brutal atrocity of their character, they had the peculiar merit, among all races of men under heaven, of preserving a rational and pure system of devotion in the midst of wild polytheism, inhuman or obscene rites, and a dark labyrinth of errours produced by ignorance and supported by interested fraud. Theological inquiries are no part of my present subject; but I cannot refrain from adding, that the collection of tracts, which we call from their excellence *the Scriptures,* contain, independently of a divine origin, more important history, and finer strains both of poetry and eloquence, than could be collected within the same compass from all other books, that were ever composed in any age or in any idiom.[45]

It is possible to give this text a charitable reading, and perhaps one ought make such an attempt to minimize its dissonance with the liberal values Jones evinced in most other ways. Toward that end, one might treat the first, horrendously disparaging phrases as a rhetorical concession he made to prejudices widespread among his readers, after which he added his own, more humane views, extolling the Hebrew people for

[43] Jones, "Sixth Anniversary Discourse, on the Persians," pp. 126–27. Note his conclusion that "the first corruption of the purest and oldest religion was the system of *Indian* Theology, invented by the *Bráhmans* and prevalent in these territories, where the book of MAHÁBÁD or MENU [*sic*] is at this hour the standard of all religious and moral duties" (ibid., p. 127). The last point rests on Jones's identification of Mahābād with Manu and his heavenly text with the Mānava Dharmaśāstra.

[44] Ibid., pp. 125–29. On the Peshdadians as Assyrian, cf. ibid., p. 186.

[45] "The Eighth Anniversary Discourse, on the Borderers, Mountaineers, and Islanders of Asia," in *Works of Sir William Jones* (n. 1 above), 3:182–83.

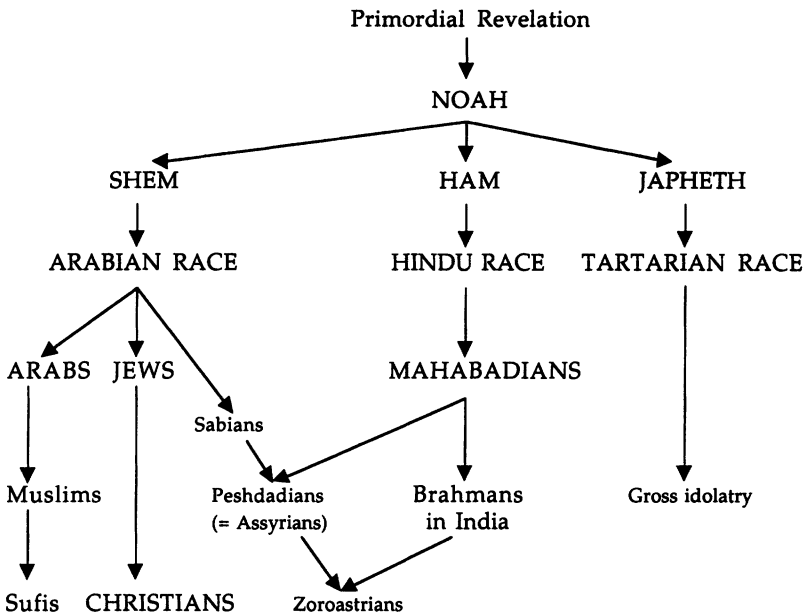

FIG. 3.—Chronology, relations, and implicit hierarchy among Persian and Judeo-Christian religions as described by Sir William Jones in his Anniversary Discourses (1784–94) (in *The Works of Sir William Jones,* ed. Anna Maria Shipley Jones [1799; reprint, Delhi: Agam Prakashan], 3:1–252). Groups listed in capital letters retain large measures of true religion from primordial revelation. Lowercase letters and smaller typeface represent ever further deviation from these original truths.

their religious fidelity and the excellence of their scriptures. But even with so generous an interpretation, the passage remains shocking. As it makes clear, Jones on the Indo-Europeans needs to be considered alongside Jones on the Jews. Doing so helps us recognize that the overarching project of his "Anniversary Discourses" was to reduce the degree to which the Hebrews were privileged above all others, especially the Indians and Iranians, peoples for whom he felt great affection, affinity, and respect. Toward this end, he made a series of strategic interventions and recalibrations. While he still privileged Israel and the line of Shem with regard to religion, he reduced that privilege to the bare minimum possible without mounting a direct challenge to Christian orthodoxy. Going further, he balanced accounts by affording a parallel privilege to Iran, the line of Ham, and the Hindu race with regard to politics and the civilizing arts. This required that he not only constitute the dubious Mahābādians as the world's first kings but that he also revalorize the institution of kingship, substituting the strongly positive valence found in Firdausi

for the negative one of the Bible. In all these steps, he found himself working within the paradigm established by Newton but against his esteemed predecessor's specific conclusions and purposes.

VIII

Two striking points emerge from these arcane details and tortuous arguments. First, they make clear how difficult it was for Enlightenment rationalism to deal with mythic materials. Rather than taming the excesses and irrationalities they took as the hallmarks of myth and thereby converting the raw ore of this genre into the polished stuff of history, scholars as brilliant and determined as Newton and Jones fell under the sway of their object of study. For all that they understood themselves as scientists and prided themselves on the disciplined, rigorous nature of their methods, their researches yielded only new variants on familiar myths. We have here a classic case of hunter turned prey as well as a novel and paradoxical genre: scholarship of/as myth.[46]

Working within this hybrid form, Newton and Jones—no less than the Bible, Firdausi, and Ussher—produced ethnogonic narratives in which they encoded a hierarchic classification of the peoples under discussion. Newton made it his task to subordinate Egyptians, Greeks, Persians, and all others to Israelites. Jones modified Newton's results in ways that brought him to the outermost limits of orthodoxy, making Iranians and other members of the Hindu race asymptotic near equals of the Hebrews.

This brings me to my second point. For all that there is something liberating, humane, and admirable in Jones's having championed the peoples of Asia, one also perceives troubling aspects to his project, one motive of which was ressentiment of the privilege accorded to Israelite history, religion, and Scripture. Particularly dangerous was his reduction of human diversity to three primal categories and the scholarly cum mythic narrative through which he sought to redistribute privilege from one racialized group to another. As is all too well known, these dangers were horrifically realized in subsequent variants of the same myth, where new terminologies and rankings were put into play. For just as Jones renamed the sons of Shem and Ham the "Arabian" and "Hindu" races and then crafted a narrative that made them nearly equal, in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, others would rename the same groups "Aryans" (or Indo-Europeans) and "Semites" in narratives that trumpeted ever more shrilly the racial superiority of the conquering state-founders over the authors of the Bible.[47]

[46] See further Lincoln, *Theorizing Myth* (n. 7 above).

[47] On the later history of this taxonomy and its horrendous consequences, see, inter alia, Poliakov (n. 2 above); George Mosse, *Toward the Final Solution: A History of European*

I should make it clear that my goal is not to impugn the reputation of a justly celebrated individual but to complicate our view of his accomplishments and the relation of person to discourse. The issue is not one of personal politics and morality but of discriminatory tendencies implicit in a narrative genre (ethnogonic myth) and its scholarly recodings. That Jones was brilliant, progressive, and humane only serves to underscore the point. Notwithstanding his admirable qualities and major contributions, he remained caught in the assumptions, structures, and styles of argumentation characteristic of the discourses of universal history and the study of myth and also prey to their dangers. That, ultimately, is the point of this article, whose genre is not exposé, polemic, or detective story but something closer to autopsy.

University of Chicago

Racism (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1985); Maurice Olender, *The Languages of Paradise* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1992); and Klaus von See, *Barbar, Gemane, Arier: Die Suche nach der identität der Deutschen* (Heidelberg: C. Winter, 1994).